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## Atrophy Waltz

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## ATROPHY WALTZ

*Dean Monti*

Malcolm sucked at the air between the index and middle finger of his left hand. Damn. If only he had learned how to smoke correctly. Meanwhile, from the forgotten Kool in his right hand, ashes dribbled onto his corduroy trousers, finding homes in the crevices of material.

While the cigarettes remained forgotten, the gimlets had not. He poured another into a Dixie cup from a smiling Kool-aid pitcher he used for these occasions.

Six hours earlier, the apartment had been immaculate, the home of a compulsive neatnik who couldn't sleep if a sock had been left hanging out of a dresser drawer. Yet now there was a prevailing decor of Dixie cups adorning all parts of the living room. He despised the taste of alcohol nearly as much as he despised tobacco. But with the small paper cups he could consume vast quantities of the brain-dulling elixir in miniature measures. After a time he would be able to proclaim to himself that he had imbibed over fifty vodka gimlets, impressive figures by anyone's standards.

Actually the aftermath did look quite awe-inspiring. Scores of empty paper cups. Much better than one glass, one bottle. One drinker.

It rather looked as though a lemonade stand had exploded in the middle of the living room. The first few cups had been stacked into a sort of unfinished, lopsided pyramid. The next twenty or so were made into an intricate geometric design on the carpet.

As the alcohol reached his cerebrum, however, the art became less creative. One of the cups was now a hat for a ceramic hotel. Another was temporarily acting as an ashtray. Recent cups had been crushed, some chewed on. At least five were under the couch.

It was three in the morning when the phone rang.



He began to grow concerned. The milkman had not yet shown himself in the shadows which appeared regularly in the kitchen window at 5:00 a.m. each day. Only the leafy branches extended their reach into the light which poured through and cast spidery legs upon the toaster in the kitchen.

The aisles of crumbs which bordered the toaster's edge and threatened to fall onto the counter suddenly became sharp as his eyes narrowed.

"I'm not certain I have a milkman," he said in a voice he didn't recognize. Was it his own voice he heard, or someone playing cruel jokes, all the while knowing that his thirst for cold milk was unbearable? Warm toast would be nice, too.

Flat on his back on the tiled floor of the kitchen, he stared at a mark on the ceiling. The smudge had been there for some time and the fact that he couldn't recall how it had gotten there didn't perturb him much. What bothered him was that he couldn't call to mind how he had gotten to the kitchen from the living room during the night.

"It's not going to be difficult," he assured himself; "certainly I can last until the milkman arrives — 6:00 a.m. at the very latest." With this erroneous yet secure thought cooling his temples like fresh Noxema, the spot on the ceiling blurred, then disappeared.

At 5:30 a.m. his eyes opened for a few moments. He could discern white objects if they were large enough, the refrigerator at his feet, and certainly the heat register against the bridge of his nose. He could not, however, judge whether the sun was ascending or descending.

Somewhere in the living room, a television was making a black and white noise, a never-ending ocean tide of sound that told him that it was too early for broadcasts — unless all the power in the area was out. Or maybe he was just between channels. Without further taxing his intellect, his brain sent a signal confirming that it was morning. Included with the message was a short telegram reminding himself that the milkman would arrive in one half of an hour. Of course it was no longer the reception of the milk that excited him, but the arrival of the milkman. It would confirm that the universe still existed and everything was still happening in its usual manner outside his door.

But at six, when the moment did not transpire, he saw no reason to get up off the kitchen floor.

An overcast sky at 6:30 a.m. threw off his already disturbed sense of time. He was afraid to look out the window. If it were clouds, it would mean a cloudy day and everything that accompanies it. On the other hand, if it were not clouds, and time was reversing itself, all the better to go back to sleep.





A few minutes later he delighted in the sound of heavy rains against the roof. At least time was not reversing itself.

Later that morning as the rain receded, a memory came back to him. He shook his head, preferring to forget it, but to no avail. It was true. He rattled his head once more, but now he was fully awake. Shuddering, his bladder answered back with a painful reminder of what too much motion would do.

Shutting his eyes tightly, he tried to escape back into sleep, hoping that the sudden memory had been part of a nightmare. But it was not.

It was the reason he had ended up in the kitchen — to answer the phone. He had taken the idea of a telephone call at 3:00 a.m. very seriously at the time, clearing his throat and adding an accusing tone.

“Hello?”

After what seemed like too long to expect a reply, a very deep, seductive female voice whispered, “the milkman will be there at 6:00 a.m., as usual.”

Long after the line went dead, Malcolm held the receiver to his ear. Finally the relentless recorded voice of the operator telling him to hang up filled him with rage.

He slammed the phone down on the cradle, but the cord had found its way under his heel. He had toppled over and fallen to the floor, face up.

The black mark on the ceiling grew large, and then it enveloped him completely.

Panic was creeping up slowly upon him. All things considered, Malcolm thought it best to get up off the floor.

Although he felt no paralysis, no numbness and not even much stiffness, getting up seemed the most impossible of all tasks. His body was willing, yet the command from the brain to carry out the procedure never came. In every other respect he felt quite normal. His vision was no longer watery, but clear and sharp beyond his own expectations.

The stump at the end of Mickey Mouse’s forearm pointed to eleven. Somewhere behind the stove was a little white four-fingered glove that belonged on the dismembered cartoon character. But as long as Mickey remained smiling there seemed no need to retrieve it, and it continued to collect oil and lint.



What if he did something stupid like throw his hands out first; or forget his house keys? Would the hands be able to let themselves back in? And how could they without the keys? Ridiculous.

It would be nice, he thought, if he could dismantle himself like the clock had done. Throw parts out one by one under the front door and then reassemble himself on the outside. An absurd thought.

Another theory supposed itself. He remembered reading that mice had the ability to squeeze their bodies through extremely narrow spaces if they needed to, and suffered no damage to internal organs whatsoever. Couldn't he also temporarily transform his bones into this state of waxy flexibility so that he might slide under the door?

He could not remember how this transient collapse of cartilage was supposed to take place. Was it an actual physical process or something born out of necessity? He remembered a time when he entered a crowded elevator and had forgotten to push the button for his desired floor. He had wanted to stop at eight, and more specifically, the men's room.

With the prospect of missing his floor fully realized and further noticing that the next stop was the twenty-third floor, he lunged his arm between the beefy limbs of several elderly women and successfully stopped the elevator at nine.

Had he thought out the process, getting his arm through a fortress of thick flesh, apologizing for the inconvenience, extracting his arm from the offended octogenarians and so on, he might have found the problem as perplexing as his current predicament.

And yet even now he longed to be in that elevator, headed for the twenty-third floor. Painful or not, it offered something the kitchen floor did not — a destination.

He shifted the weight of his body from right to left, but still did not get up.

Nonsense.

He could get up anytime he wanted to. All he needed was a good reason. There must be something he needed to do, someone he had to see, somewhere to go. When he figured this out he would be galvanized into action. He was certain it would all come to him. In the meantime he thought it best not to move too much, and think about something else. By getting away from it he could approach the dilemma with a fresh perspective later on.





His thoughts drifted discursively once again. No, don't think of food. Chinese food. Earlier in the week he had been scanning the yellow pages of the phone book looking for a Chinese restaurant that delivered. It seemed simple enough. The Italians delivered. The Greeks delivered. The Mexicans delivered.

The Chinese offered no such service in their advertisements. Thinking that it was simply an oversight, and a reprehensible one at that, he began to phone all the oriental listings he could find, but they all confirmed. No delivery.

Maybe they didn't drive. Perhaps they didn't deliver in the suburbs. Or maybe they were trapped in their kitchens too.

The sun had set once more and he had not yet moved. All afternoon he watched it pass over his torso, his legs, and finally his toes. If he could gain an erection he would make a great sundial, he thought. Isn't that funny? It must be. Mickey is still smiling and somewhere in the living room he could feel a smirk on the face of the Kool-aid pitcher. The black spot on the ceiling had disappeared. It must have been an insect, but it certainly didn't look like one earlier. It had looked like a smudge. Whatever it had been, it had moved on. For a brief moment he wondered whether it had been there at all. But no, he was certain it had been there right after the phone rang.

The phone. The words suddenly meant something. All that would have to happen would be the phone ringing. It would be the reason, the salvation, the power that would will him up off the tiles. What a simple answer it had been after all. The phone.

It would happen sooner or later. There was no sense in speculating exactly when. So Malcolm smiled in unison with Mickey and the Kool-aid pitcher for the first time since all this began, and slumbered again.

He woke up some time during the night, suffering a pang of anxiety. What if? What if the phone never rang again? But he quickly gave up the inquiry. Even if the phone didn't ring, he thought, he was bound to think of a reason to get up. And after all, it was all he needed. Just a reason.